Poisoned dumplings incident reveals fragility of Sino-Japanese relations

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Sino-Japanese relations again plunged into mutual recriminations after Japanese authorities announced on January 30 that 10 Japanese citizens developed food poisoning symptoms after eating Chinese-made frozen gyoza or dumplings during December and January. The affair rapidly became a major diplomatic incident, even as Chinese President Hu Jintao was planning to visit Japan in April.

Japanese authorities found an organophosphate pesticide, or methamidophos, on the inner and outer sides of the gyoza packaging and in the vomit of people poisoned by the dumplings. No pesticide was found, however, in the fillings or the dough of the gyoza. The pesticide levels were 400 times the allowable limit for vegetables imported into Japan. Such a high level led experts to suspect that the dumplings were deliberately contaminated. Methamidophos is banned in Japan and was banned in China in 2004, but is reportedly still in use.

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda added fuel to the fire. Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura immediately told the media: "I'm afraid there was rather loose safety awareness on the Chinese side." On February 5, Health Minister Yoichi Masuzoe declared he suspected the case was a "deliberate" poisoning, and Japanese police said they were treating the case as "attempted murder".

The Japanese media frenzy was typified by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on February 1: "In various parts of China large-scale food poisoning caused by residual agricultural chemicals and other substances has happened one after another. We have to question whether China as a whole plays fast and loose with food safety."

The Japanese government recalled all products made by the manufacturer of the "poisoned" dumplings—Tianyang Food, based in China's Hebei province. The recalls affected 606 public schools, although no children have fallen ill. Many supermarkets removed Chinese-made foodstuffs. Skylark Co., which owns more than 4,000 restaurants, suspended the use of Chinese-made ingredients—although none of them came from Tianyang.

China is Japan's second largest source of food imports after the US and accounts for over half the frozen products that Japan imports. In a poll conducted by Kyodo news agency, 76 percent of the respondents said they would not buy foods imported from China. More than 4,000 people reported sickness of some sort after eating Chinese-made dumplings, but most of the cases turned out to be gastroenteritis. Psychologists indicated that extensive media coverage had led to cases of "autosuggestion", with people mistakenly linking their discomforts to "poisoning".

A Japanese investigation team that toured the Tianyang dumpling plant founded it was "clean", with no "abnormality". Nevertheless, Japan Tobacco, which owns Sojiz Foods Corp, the importer of the dumplings, was forced to call off a proposed merger with Nissin Food Products to form the largest frozen food importer in Japan.

Beijing sought to downplay the incident by sending five Chinese experts to Japan in early February in order to show its "cooperation" with Tokyo. Chinese President Hu Jintao dispatched a senior envoy, State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan, to Japan to express sympathy to the victims.

Product safety has become a sensitive subject for Beijing, following the revelations of Chinese-made toxic pet foods and hazardous toys in the US last year. The Chinese government fears that the reputation of its export industries, which employ tens of millions of workers, could be damaged. In fact, the lack of safety in Chinese-made products is largely the result of the world's giant corporations exploiting cheap labour and lax regulations in that country.

China's General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (GASIQ) reported on February 22 that two other allegedly contaminated batches of Chinese-made buns and pork rolls in Japan came from two factories in China wholly owned by the Japanese Nicky Food Company. Chinese authorities said the factories might have bought substandard raw materials from suppliers other than approved export farms.

While Japanese officials blamed China for the "poisoned" foods, their Chinese counterparts did the opposite. In early February, GASIQ deputy chief Wei Chuanzhong declared in a meeting with four visiting Japanese investigators: "A small group of radicals who don't want to see Sino-Japanese friendship develop may have taken extreme measures." Wei was pointing to the possible involvement of right-wing activists in Japan.

A February 16 article in *Yomiuri Shimbun* attacked Wei's assertion, saying it did not "appear to be based on any concrete evidence". The newspaper reported that Japanese police believed it "highly likely" that the pesticide was added during manufacture or packaging in China because it was apparently difficult to contaminate sealed dumpling packs being shipped to Japanese retailers.

Last Thursday, Yu Xinmin, the top criminal investigator at Beijing's Ministry of Public Security, told a press conference that

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the poisoned dumplings were “sabotage” but refused to accept assertions by the Japanese police that it was “highly likely” to have occurred in China. “We have convincing evidence supporting our conclusion and so do Japanese police. The problem now is whose evidence is more scientific, objective and reliable?”

Yu then expressed “regret” that the Japanese police were not cooperative. Japan’s National Police Agency chief Hiroto Yoshimura responded: “We have provided all documents that we thought would be helpful to China, and I do not understand why we have to hear the word ‘regret’.”

While it remains unclear who poisoned the dumplings, extreme nationalists can be found in both Japan and China. The Beijing regime has been deliberately whipping up Chinese patriotism, primarily through various anti-Japanese sentiments, in order to divert social tensions. It is playing on a mixture of hostility to Japan’s wartime atrocities and chauvinist prejudices toward Japanese people. In 2005, this atmosphere erupted into a wave of anti-Japanese protests among layers of middle-class youth in China.

Japan’s prime minister from 2001 to 2006, Junichiro Koizumi, sought to revive Japanese nationalism and militarism. He repeatedly visited the Yasukuni Shrine to honour Japan’s war dead and approved history textbooks that whitewashed Japan’s wartime record. In doing so, Koizumi also cultivated a reactionary constituency among middle class layers. One purpose was to enable his government to pass deeply unpopular legislation to circumvent the “pacifist” clause in the Japanese constitution, which bans the use of military force beyond “self-defence”.

Koizumi dispatched naval ships to the Indian Ocean to supply the US-led war in Afghanistan in 2001. More controversially, he deployed Japanese ground troops in a war zone—in Iraq—for the first time since World War II. His policy was designed to strengthen the US-Japan alliance, inevitably provoking tensions with China. His successors, Shinzo Abe and Fukuda, sought to improve relations with Beijing, partly because of Japanese corporations’ huge investments in China—now Japan’s largest trading partner. Fukuda, who was critical of Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni, visited Beijing in December.

Fukuda’s maneuver does not represent a fundamental shift from Koizumi’s policy. He came to office last October after Abe resigned in the face of public opposition to renewing Japan’s Afghan mission. Fukuda pushed the legislation through by overriding the upper house dominated by the opposition Democratic Party of Japan. Now Fukuda is facing the same falling public approval ratings as Abe did. Fukuda is using the fear of “poisoned” Chinese dumpling to shore up his government.

Sino-Japanese relations were already strained. On February 23, the eighth round of a top-level “strategic dialogue” between the two countries failed to reach an agreement on disputes over maritime demarcations and natural gas fields in the East China Sea. Asked by the *Financial Times* whether the disputes would be over soon, Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Koumura replied: “I am not necessarily all that optimistic.”

The *Asahi Shimbun* reported in January that Chinese bombers made 40 sorties in air space over the disputed Chunxiao gas field (known as Shirakaba in Japan) in the East China Sea in September 2007. Japanese fighter jets were scrambled 12 times. Japanese military experts said China’s “provocative” actions were aimed not only at claiming the gas field. The waters around Chunxiao are also used by US fleets stationed in Japan. A Japanese analyst, Kensuke Ebata, told *Asahi* the Chinese military regarded entire areas, from Okinawa and the Philippines to Taiwan, as the “first line of islands” in any conflict in the Pacific. Based on this strategy, the Chunxiao gas field was part of China’s “inland seas”.

Anxiety in Japanese and American ruling circles about the rise of China was displayed at a “China Symposium” held in Tokyo on January 23, organised by the Keizai Koho Center and the US Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Robert Madsen, a senior fellow of the MIT Center for International Studies, likened Sino-Japanese relations to those between Germany and France from the late nineteenth century until 1945, when they fought a series of wars for the domination of Europe. He pointed out that Germany was only willing to cooperate with France after it was defeated in World War II. “The equivalent time for Japan would have been 15 or 20 years ago, when Japan was much more powerful relative to China.” Now China sees no reason to bow to Japan. Professor Takashi Shiraishi of Japan’s National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies cited a statistic: in 1995, 8 of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had more trade with Japan than with China. By 2005, that number was only two.

At the conference, the US ambassador to Japan, Thomas Schieffer, warned: “The old order [in Northeast Asia] is changing and no one is quite sure how they will fit in when it is over.” While pushing for a stronger US-Japan alliance, Schieffer declared: “We must continually remind the Chinese that we are not trying to contain them.” These assurances are unlikely to prevent China continuing to seek its own alliances, particularly with Russia. The diplomatic row over “poisoned” dumplings may eventually recede, but it reflects ongoing great-power tensions.

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